

# A Phenomenology of Professional Failure

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Draft: January 1, 2019      Release: May 6, 2019

## Abstract

This is a (likely incomplete) transcendental phenomenology of professional failure. You can read it, if you like. Or don't.



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# 1 Introduction

I experienced great disappointment as I tried and failed, from 2015-2019, to secure a position working inside of professional philosophy. I spent a great deal of time reflecting on the experience: one of the research interests I had cultivated in philosophy was (properly Husserlian, transcendental) phenomenology. Living through failure was distressing, but I still found it stimulating to try to understand the intentional structure of my experiences. Old habits die hard.

What follows is a phenomenological analysis of experiences of professional failure. It may be of interest to anyone interested in phenomenology. It may be of interest to anyone with a specific interest in this kind of experience—perhaps if they are undergoing it themselves, or seeing an Other go through it, or even telling a story in which a character goes through something like it. It may, in fact, be of very little interest, and I won't say anything further in an attempt to persuade you to read it. One of the few perks of professional failure is that once one has come out on the other side of it, one is spared the labor of justifying oneself to the profession. I'm not contributing to any ongoing discussion here. I make no attempt to situate myself in much literature besides phenomenology, and even then, I won't employ completely hygienic citation practices. I also won't always speak in an overly professional tone – which feels nice.

The essay is not intended as a piece of “quit-lit.” In the first place, I didn't quit, so this is a misnomer. But further, to the extent I understand the unspoken rules that seem to be at work in the nascent quit-lit *genre*, here are some of the ways I break them.

(1) My own autobiographical details are largely irrelevant, and generally omitted. At best, they could serve as token illustrations; but my goal, as in any phenomenological investigation, is to understand the essential structure of a type of conscious experience.

(2) While I do have some lingering “theoretical” interest in whether the phenomenological analyses I offer are apt, I am – genuinely – not seeking any *personal* validation. Suggestions for how to improve my analyses are vaguely welcome; less welcome are heartfelt expressions of encouragement or solidarity (particularly from people I have not encountered face-to-face). Completely irrelevant would be any rejoinders that misunderstand me as in any way bemoaning my experiences. The theme here is not “woe is me,” but rather “how does this work?”

(3) Thinking through these issues was cathartic, but the bulk of this *essay* is not intended as catharsis. Writing the essay was work, and it is intended as a work of quasi-scholarship: I hope to accomplish a bit of the kind of intellectual work that a philosopher (of a certain stripe) would do. Old habits die hard.

(4) I'm not trying to persuade anyone (including myself) that it's a good idea to quit any profession, or that it's a blessing in disguise to fail in any profession. I myself disliked it, and would not recommend it to a friend. This negative evaluation forms part of the phenomena I will examine below, but did not motivate my examination.

(5) I do not intend to moralize about the “plight” of any profession, or to offer any scathing critique of socio-economic-bureaucratic forces that might be at work in “corrupting” any profession. Such particularities about specific professions are largely irrelevant.

Let's get on with it.

## 2 “Professional Failure?”

“Fail” is said in many ways. One can be called a failure by someone for not meeting their expectations, even if these are not one’s own expectations. Here I am focused on cases where one thinks of oneself as a failure, by one’s own lights.

By one’s own lights, one can fail in even the simplest of tasks. If I reach to grab a glass of water and accidentally knock it over, I might regard myself as failing. This sort of one-off failure is relatively harmless in the long run. I might take a moment to berate myself for getting it wrong, but I can mop up the water, pour a new glass, and get on with things without too much interruption or distress. If the consequences of a one-off failure are severe enough, then it may cause more significant distress. But in this essay I am focused on failures that are a bit more involved than isolated, one-off failures. It may help to sketch out a rough picture of professionalization.

Professionalization is the process whereby one can be inducted into a profession as a full-fledged member in good standing. Being counted as a member – being recognized as a “professional” oneself – requires gaining specialized knowledge and specialized skills, and for this reason, it is usually a prolonged process, and often proceeds through phases. Some basic skills and knowledge can be acquired in early training (e.g., a B.A.). More advanced training is required to fine-tune these skills and develop expertise, often through a kind of prolonged apprenticeship (e.g., M.A., Ph.D.). All this training is required to put one in a position to *attempt* to demonstrate their competence as a peer to, and of roughly equal standing with, existing members of the profession.

Initiates often begin the process of professionalization based on some pre-existing interests, presuming that these interests would be fulfilled by the work-activities of the profession. One wants to be a member because (one thinks) one wants to do that work. But make no mistake: the process of professionalization is built to whip nascent interest into the shape of responsible *work*-activity that meets the standards of the profession. One role of mentors is to provide clear assessment of how well one is faring in meeting those standards. Through the process, one is conforming to externally-imposed standards, reforming oneself (and usually, institutionalizing oneself, in a sense). Because of the investment of time and labor involved, and because of the intimate and self-critical character of conformation, one generally can’t sustain engagement through the phases of professionalization unless one is *committed* to it. Luck helps. It can also be useful and encouraging to interact with associates who are going through a similar process and facing similar challenges. But most importantly, one has to be able to see each challenge as a worthwhile step towards the end-goal of membership in the profession. Success at each step is thus thematically linked to the larger success of becoming a member of the profession. This is generally bound up with one’s self-conception or identity: (one thinks that) one wants to *be* one of those people, *be* a member of that profession, and as one is working towards that goal, one understands oneself *as* on-the-way-to-being, or becoming, the person who (one thinks) one wants to be.

For reasons like these, (what I am calling) professional failure is not quite so easily overcome as spilling some water, and is a bit more complex than any isolated, one-off failure. A failure on the path of professionalization threatens to un-do and invalidate a great deal of prior work, it challenges one’s own identity, and it complicates relationships with peers and mentors. As I intend to use the term, experiences of professional failure occur with the features and in the contexts summarized below:

1. In making the attempt, one sees oneself as committed to a plan, the goal of which is membership in some in-group (the profession).

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2. One sees membership in the in-group as an aspect of identity that one would like to have.
  3. One currently sees oneself as someone-who-is-on-the-way-to-being, or becoming, a member, in virtue of working through the plan; one tentatively feels at-home alongside Others in the in-group.
  4. One sees oneself as failing in the attempt.
  5. The failure is seen as preventing advancement of the plan.
  6. Since previous steps in the plan were supposedly preparation for this attempt, the failure calls into question whether and how well one has succeeded in previous steps.
  7. Since success in the plan consists of attaining an identity as a member, the failure calls into question whether one can attain that identity.
  8. Since failure in the attempt interrupts progress in the plan, it calls into question one's current identity as someone-who-is-on-the-way-to-being, or becoming, a member, and thus calls into question relationships with Others.

The distinctive experiences of failure that I want to discuss here are ones that exhibit all these features. We haven't done any phenomenology yet by simply sketching out the target class of experiences using 1-8. The aim of the forthcoming phenomenological analysis is to more precisely analyze the essential intentional structure of experiences like these. At first pass, the aim is to understand more fully what is involved in all the talk of "seeing-as" and "calling into question" in 1-8 above.

Conditions 1-8 are not quite sufficient to clarify my aims here. Conditions 1-8 are satisfied, to an extent, in any *single* case of an experience of professional failure. What I am especially interested in examining are cases where an array of *multiple* experiences of failure occur, all meeting conditions 1-8, repeatedly calling into question one's professionalization. I'm interested in cases where repeated professional failure leads to an experience of *abjection*, and in how this influences one's experienced identity and experienced social standing.

Some caveats and additional clarifications of scope.

(1) I don't especially care whether cases meeting my conditions are especially common or especially rare: the analysis I'll offer is simply intended to fit such cases where they occur.

(2) I don't especially care whether a commonsense or intuitive conception of "profession" is required to get an experience that fits these conditions. Perhaps trying to become friends with a group of people and to join in their social activities will count as a trying to join a "profession" by these criteria: so be it; then my analyses should fit such cases.

(3) Perhaps there are cases one might want to call "experiences of professional failure" where some of these features (especially those regarding self-conceptions of identity) are lacking; that's fine, but I'm not interested in them here.

(4) Perhaps under the right circumstances, some people experience knocking over a glass of water as the kind of failure I've described here. I think that would be unfortunate, but if so, my analyses should fit their case.

### 3 “Phenomenology?”

I won’t provide a thorough introduction to Husserlian phenomenology,<sup>1</sup> but there are some aspects of the Husserlian approach I’ll presuppose, and a few concepts I’ll deploy centrally. I’ll introduce each of them as briefly as I can in this section. I’m not really “doing” phenomenology yet in this section, I’m just clarifying what it is I’ll do when I do it later.

#### 3.1 Epoche & Intentionality

The fundamental presupposition of Husserlian phenomenology (though it is not a *mere* presupposition) is that the epoche is the correct route to understanding intentionality.<sup>2</sup>

The epoche (“bracketing”) is a change of perspective through which one ceases to presume the mind-independent actuality of the entire world and everything in it. We normally presume the actuality of the world as a matter of course – this is “the Natural Attitude.” The epoche suspends and interrupts the Natural Attitude. The epoche can be thought of as a modulation of radical skepticism (“Cartesian doubt”). Unlike the skeptic, we don’t especially care to work out what can be known with certainty, nor is our main aim to locate some foundational certainties from which to derive other pieces of knowledge, systematically recovering some of our convictions about the world. We don’t aim to challenge or undermine our naïve certainty about the existence of the world at all, really. Rather, the idea is that we *set aside* or “put out of play” all questions (and answers) about whether any object of conscious experience exists. We treat all such objects of experience as phenomena – merely apparent or merely purported objects.

The idea is that when we take up this perspective, we are able to examine conscious experience on its own terms: *that* is our objective. In particular, the intentional structure of conscious experience remains intact. For example, suppose I see a black coffee mug. I’m convinced it’s there. I set that conviction aside, and regard my perception simply as an experience as-of a black coffee mug. The perception remains a perception as-of a material object, even after I bracket any assumptions about the object’s existence. This kind of directedness towards a purported object is called “intentionality,” and it is not at all modified by the epoche. The epoche reveals that intentionality is built into the structure of experience itself. The structure of an experience as-of a real-world coffee mug has got nothing inherently to do with real-world, mind-independent coffee mugs. By contrast, all our beliefs about real-world, mind-independent objects have got everything to do with the structure of the experiences that purport to present us with such objects.

#### 3.2 Pure Ego & Essence

Things get a little weird when we recognize that, normally, we are constantly presupposing the reality of ourselves as an embodied human agent in the social world. These are some of the presumptions regarding existence that are to be bracketed in the epoche.

Virtually the entirety of post-Husserlian “phenomenology” declares that this isn’t possible. In particular, it’s often claimed that we can’t bracket the existence of our bodies

<sup>1</sup>Husserl’s *Logische Untersuchungen* are not here regarded as proper phenomenology. I’ve drank the transcendental kool-aid, and from this perspective (i.e., Husserl’s) anyone reaching back to *LU* for a solid grip on phenomenology has largely missed the point.

<sup>2</sup>See *Ideen I* and *Die Krisis*.

(embodiment is just too essential for our consciousness), or that we can't bracket the existence of other agents alongside us in the social world (mundane intersubjectivity is just too essential for our consciousness). I neither have nor need an argument to convince anyone otherwise: this isn't the place for an argument. Some of us claim to be able to *do* this thing, the epoche, and to be able to bracket our own existence as embodied humans in the social world. No formal argument could *convince* anyone who says they can't that they can. What is at issue is simply a free act. Do it if you like, or don't. If you do it, you'll see that you can. Maybe you find it difficult to do, and say that you can't – I'll even believe, if you like, that you can't. But please, grant me the same courtesy. Don't offer me an argument to try to convince me that I can't. I do, on occasion.<sup>3</sup>

When we do bracket our existence as a human, as I said, things get a little weird. We can ask: "who is performing the epoche?" We can't answer "me, a human subject," since if we've done the thing, we've bracketed ourselves as human subjects, and could at best speak only of "the phenomenon of me as a human subject." The question was precisely: "who has carried out the act of changing their perspective, such that they can no longer assume themselves to exist as a human subject?"

"The pure ego" is the phenomenological term used to refer to the conscious subject who performs the epoche, and who is thus capable of understanding themselves as having a dimension of subjectivity beyond empirical, human subjectivity. This remainder of subjectivity, revealed through the epoche, is called "transcendental subjectivity." The central purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to investigate it, with particular attention to how intentionality is structured and how it arises such that consciousness purports to present us with objects of consciousness.

Since we bracket the reality of ourselves as empirically real human agents, we don't understand any of our conscious experiences as empirically real psychological events (let alone, gods forbid, neural events) that occur in the objective time of the world. We've bracketed all the assumptions of existence that would be required to understand experiences in that way. We're only interested in experiences as aspects of the intentional structure of transcendental subjectivity. And in pure phenomenology, we're not interested in studying them one at a time as isolated factoids, looking for their idiosyncratic features. Rather, we aim to understand them "in their essence," meaning, we want to understand the necessary features of broad types of experience. We might investigate, for example, what all experiences of perception necessarily have in common: what features of intentionality are essential to the class of perceptions, as such.

Here I'm interested in experiences of professional failure as delineated in §2 above, and I want to do a transcendental phenomenology of them. I'm going to perform the epoche, bracket all assumptions of worldly existence, and attempt to uncover essential features of the intentional structure of all such experiences. If that doesn't sound like fun, feel free to get off the boat.

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<sup>3</sup>Similar sentiments are expressed in earlier varieties of transcendental, German idealism. Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*: "No one can be compelled to do this... this consciousness cannot be demonstrated to anyone; each person must freely create it in himself" (Fichte I, 429/11); "...we have a few other concepts besides theirs... of which they cannot judge, since it simply does not exist for them. Let them go about their business, and leave us to pursue our own" (Fichte I, 498/68). From Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*: transcendental "Self-consciousness... is an exercise of absolute freedom, to which one can certainly be directed, but not compelled" (Schelling 365/24).

### 3.3 The Phenomena of Me, as Human Subject

It's important to emphasize again that the epoche is not a mode of skeptical doubt. When I bracket my existence as a human subject, I'm not seriously doubting that I am in fact a human subject, I'm just setting the question of my worldly existence aside. All the phenomena of me as a human remain. (A similar thing goes for *every* object of consciousness: no phenomenon is lost in the epoche, presumptions of existence are simply set aside.) Indeed, part of the project of transcendental phenomenology is to try to clarify *how* I appear to myself as a human subject: how it is that transcendental subjectivity "constitutes" the phenomenon of me as a human subject. Here's the short version, in three steps.<sup>4</sup>

First: transcendental subjectivity has its own temporality. Even after we bracket the existence of the world and its history, transcendental subjectivity has its own history. Consciousness is never a punctate or pointilistic awareness of a single moment, but involves a consciousness of an immediate past and an immediate future. Built into the intentional structure of every experience is some degree of directedness toward the past, and some directedness toward the future.<sup>5</sup> As this brief "window" of consciousness (what Husserl calls "the living present") is repeatedly filled with content, the directedness at each moment toward past and future stitches experiences together into a continuous subjective time. Every experience we have takes its place within this subjective time.

Second: It is the pure ego who ultimately endorses any thesis about the way things are, in an act of judgment. For example, perception purports to present us with the way the world is: a presumptive thesis of existence is built into the intentionality of perception. The pure ego can go along with this thesis, forming the belief that the world is as it appears; or the pure ego can resist this thesis, believing that the world is otherwise. I'll say a bit more about this in §§3.4&3.5 below. (And of course, there is a third option: the pure ego can "bracket" the thesis completely and simply apprehend the phenomenon that the perception purports to present, without judging one way or the other.)

Third (the key step, and a big one): Some of the acts of judgment that the pure ego carries out constitute the phenomena of my human subjectivity. I can reflect on my past experiences in subjective time, and can come to a judgment that I am a stable human subject. Judgments about the stability of my material body (*Körper*) are relatively straightforward cases of the kinds of perceptual judgments I've just discussed. Things are trickier when it comes to understanding judgments about the stability of my personal character. Here's a sketch of how this works.

My experiences now include a directedness toward experiences in my subjective past. I can divert my attention to those past experiences. Some of my past experiences present me as a subject who had certain motives at a particular moment in subjective time. These motives contained theses<sup>6</sup> about what was valuable, what should be done, what should be thought – most generally, theses about what should come next. At the time, I endorsed some of these theses. Reflecting on these past motives, I could now go along with their theses again: for example, I might re-affirm a motive, sustaining a conviction

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<sup>4</sup>See *Ideen II*.

<sup>5</sup>Strictly speaking, this intentional directedness toward past and future is not just *there*, but is built into experience through passive syntheses. Husserl's genetic phenomenology of association clarifies this.

<sup>6</sup>Strictly speaking, in the broadest sense of the terms, all theses are to be understood phenomenologically as motives: all theses provide some motivation for the ego to implement them actively by endorsing them in judgment.

in it. If I reflect on this re-affirming judgment, I can judge further that my convictions are long-lasting: they have a duration that spans large portions of subjective time. Long-lasting convictions in subjective time are the key phenomena that, naïvely, we take to be appearances of ourselves as a human subject with a stable personal character who is (purportedly) engaged with a world.

Alternatively, I can resist re-affirmation of an old motive, letting it die. If I reflect on this withholding of re-affirmation, I can judge further that I do not have a stable conviction that lasts over a long duration of subjective time. A lack of long-lasting convictions cannot naïvely be taken as an appearance of a human subject with a stable personal character; rather, they are taken as the appearance of ourselves as a human subject whose motives are fluid and whose personal character has changed.

It is through these iterated reflective judgments that the phenomena of convictions are or are not constituted, and these convictions (or lack thereof) – plus some niceties regarding how all this is related to experiences of my lived Body (*Leib*) and of Others – are the phenomena which purport to present me as an empirically real human subject in the world. Naïvely (before the epoche), we go along with theses that we have a personal character, judging (without much deliberation) that we are such a human subject, whose convictions are empirical psychological phenomena occurring in the objective time of the world. Once we endorse the thesis that this human subject exists, we characteristically overlook the pure ego's role as an active subject: all the things we do as a subject are understood, without further ado, as acts of an empirically real human subject. In the epoche, we don't go along with the thesis that we are empirically real humans, and we regain an understanding of the pure ego; but the phenomena of ourselves as human subjects remain as phenomena after the epoche. Indeed, the epoche lets us see how those phenomena arise in transcendental subjectivity.

In the foregoing I've superficially referred to an individual ego making isolated decisions on the basis of individual experiences, and constituting its own experience of itself as-of a human subject. But the point was that this is how things work *in essence*. In essence, anyone's experiences of themselves as-of a human subject arise through iterated reflective judgments that constitute (or fail to constitute) long-lasting convictions. Husserl calls all this the "sedimentation" or "precipitation" (*Niederschlag*) of convictions, which are the appearances as-of a personal ego.

### 3.4 Modality and Modalization

In the foregoing sub-section, I've discussed "theses" that are built into the intentional structure of experiences. Let me say a bit more about them, and about how they interact.

Many theses arise in transcendental subjectivity as a matter of course, without the pure ego's active involvement. We're not talking about someone sitting down and thinking hard to creatively cook up a hypothesis or conjecture. For example: we don't need to do anything to *make* perception *purport* to present us with the world. Instead what it is to have a perception is (essentially) to have an experience whose intentionality has already been constituted to contain a belief-like thesis of worldly existence. (This is partly why perception seems, naïvely, to be something we passively undergo, and why it seems as if the world simply reveals itself to us as soon as we care to take a glance or give a listen.)

But not all theses of existence are equal. There are many "modalities" or "modes" a thesis can have. For present purposes, it will do to distinguish: (*a*) theses that occur in a mode of certainty, (*b*) theses that occur in some mode of probability (whether high or low), and (*c*) theses that occur in a mode of doubt.



Husserl rarely discusses concrete cases as illustrations, but in the passage I'll reproduce in a moment, he will eventually offer one. Here he is discussing the intentional structure that supports the naïve certainty that is characteristic of our perception of material things. The idea is that any momentary experience as-of a thing has built-into it two coordinated sets of expectations: (1) "kinesthetic" expectations of how I would have experiences as-of my Body were I to move in relation to the thing and explore it, and (2) perceptual expectations of how the thing-phenomenon would appear as I explored it. If these expectations come to pass "harmoniously," then theses regarding the existence of the thing, in the naïve mode of certainty, can persist un-modified. If, however, experiences don't unfold harmoniously and expectations are flouted, then earlier experiences must be modalized or "corrected" in some way – old experiences cannot continue to be experiences as-of the world as it *is*, if new experiences are as-of the world being *otherwise*. If experiences cannot be synthesized harmoniously, one of them must have its presumption of "validity" modified or called into question. Here's Husserl:

Another extraordinarily important thematic direction has not yet been named; it is characterized by the phenomenon of the *alteration of validity*—for example, the alteration of being into illusion [*z.b. des Wandels von Sein in Schein*]. In continuous perception a thing is there for me in the straightforward ontic certainty [*Seinsgewißheit*] of immediate presence—though I must add: normally, for only when, giving my kinesthesia free play, I experience concurrent exhibitings as belonging to it is the consciousness sustained of the one thing in actual presence, exhibiting itself in manifold fashion as itself. But if I ask what is implied in the fact that the thing-exhibitings belong to the altering kinesthesia, I recognize that a hidden intentional "if-then" relation is at work here: the exhibitings must occur in a certain systematic order; it is in this way that they are indicated in advance, in expectation, in the course of a harmonious perception. The actual kinestheses here lie within the system of kinesthetic capacity, which is correlated with the system of possible following events harmoniously belonging to it. This is, then, the intentional background of every straightforward ontic certainty of a presented thing.

Often, however, a breach in this harmony occurs: being is transformed into illusion or simply into being-doubtful [*Zweifelhaftsein*], being-merely-possible [*Möglicherweisein*], being-probable [*Wahrscheinlichsein*], being-after-all-not-completely-illusory [*Ja-doch-nicht-nichtiger-Schein-sein*], etc. The illusion is undone through "correction," through changing the sense in which the thing had been perceived. It is easy to see that the change of apperceptive sense takes place through a change of the expectation-horizon of the multiplicities anticipated as normal (i.e., as running on harmoniously). For example, one saw a man, but then, upon touching him, had to reinterpret him as a mannequin (exhibiting itself visually as a man).

*Die Krisis*, pp.164-165 in *HUA VI*,  
pp.161-162 in Carr's translation (amended)

Hopefully this gives the basic flavor of the "modes" that theses can have, and how these can be altered in "modalization" (e.g., correction).

What may not be entirely clear from this passage is that such modalization often occurs in transcendental subjectivity without the pure ego's active involvement. We often don't need to do anything ourselves to make such a "correction" and for such modalizations

to occur. Typically, we go about the world blissfully unaware of the work that has been done in transcendental subjectivity to constitute the appearance of a stable world.

To try to illustrate this, let's consider a radical case. Take a moment – this will start as soon as you click and will only last about 15 seconds, so be ready – and look at [this piece of art](#) by Patrick Hughes. The first time I experienced something like this, I found that I had very little understanding of what I was seeing. I initially had one set of experiences as-of the world that contained certain expectations – expectations that future experience would unfold and the world would appear thus-and-so. This was followed by another set of experiences as-of the world, and these experiences proceeded otherwise than I had expected. All these experiences as-of the world could not simultaneously maintain their naïve thesis of ontic validity (the world could not be both thus-and-so and otherwise). Without any involvement on my part, all these experiences had lost any presumption to full validity, and had turned into perception in the mode of doubt. I remember feeling distinctly uncomfortable as I tried to work out what I had seen and what had happened. It was only after the experiences that I could make my own judgments about the matter and egoically endorse any theses about the way the world was; in the initial experience, I was simply confronted with the shock of modalization that had already occurred.

This is a nice segue to the next and final bit of phenomenology that I'll review, but before turning to that, let me emphasize: *ontic* validities, regarding the existence of mundane material objects, are only a special case. A great many other varieties of validity will become central in §§4&5 below. For now, it is sufficient to introduce the idea of socio-cultural or “spiritual” (*geistig*) validities. It's one thing for transcendental subjectivity to constitute experiences as-of physical objects; its another for those purported objects to be experienced as having a cultural or interpersonal *significance*. The short version here is that cultural objects are experienced as having motivating power for human subjects: they are experienced as soliciting or licensing human actions.

### 3.5 Act-schism

When the naïve presumption of an experience's validity is put into question without any egoic involvement, this is what Husserl calls “passive doubt.”<sup>7</sup> Often, minor cases of passive doubt can also be resolved (through modalization) without any active involvement from the ego. Usually, transcendental subjectivity is working to maintain appearances as-of a stable world, and often, it succeeds. Husserl calls this “passive decision-making” – without the ego's active involvement, options for how to interpret and synthesize experiences as-of the world may be available, and options may be quietly discarded in a “decision” that preserves a stable experience as-of a stable world.

But this is not always so – the “radical case” I just offered as illustration is one in which we might actually become aware of lingering doubt that has arisen in perception, but has not yet been fully-resolved. If we want to resolve it, we are put into *active* doubt: the pure ego itself gets involved as we try to work out what is going on. In such cases, transcendental subjectivity has not been able to quietly discard some option, and we are left with two (or more) conflicting theses, both of which retain some claim to validity. As the pure ego initially steps into these experiences to try make its own decision, it is initially acting receptively: it tries going along with the theses that experience has offered up. The ego cannot simultaneously go along with both theses; in active doubt, the pure

<sup>7</sup>See *Analyses Concerning Passive & Active Syntheses*.

ego is pulled in two different directions. In considering the conflicting theses, the ego is engaged in:

a mode of comportment [*Verhalten*] that displaces the ego into an act-schism [*das Ich in Aktspaltung versetzendes*]. This essentially and immediately implies an uneasiness [*Unbehagen*] and an original drive [*einen ursprünglichen Trieb*] to get beyond it, to come back to the normal condition of unanimity [*der normalen Zustand der Einigkeit*]. There arises a striving [*Streben*] toward a firm decision, one that is ultimately uninhibited and pure. It frequently happens that the established concordance, and through this the inner unity of the ego with itself that is aimed at, can be lost once again (*PAS* 2.§15.100).<sup>8</sup>

In order to resolve active doubt and to escape this act-schism, an egoic act of decision-making is required, and this is an act of “striking down validity” or “setting-aside-validity” (“*Außer-Geltung-Setzen*”) (*PAS* 2.§14.96).<sup>9</sup> Since the presumptive validity of the theses has not been resolved passively through modalization, the ego must engage in an act that puts some thesis out of action despite the fact that the thesis does, for itself, continue to make a claim about the way the world is.<sup>10</sup> While active decision-making can return us to a kind of harmonious experience of the world, it does not fully restore the naïve certainty that is characteristic of perception. It is instead a form of “impure certainty” (*unreiner Gewißheit*) since it is secured only through the act of setting-aside-validities that (were they reconsidered) would pose a challenge to the thesis we have endorsed through active decision-making.

### 3.6 Sum: The Plan

I’m ready to do a phenomenology of experiences of professional failure (§2). While I’m of course referring to experiences that I, as a human subject, actually had, I’ll be performing the epoche (§3.1) to try to examine the essential intentional structures of these experiences (§3.2): if it ever looks like I’m referring to objects in the world, I mean to be referring to phenomena. To provide this phenomenological analysis I’ll make use of the concepts of modalization (§3.4) and act-schism (§3.5). One of my main aims is to clarify how experiences of professional failure alter the constitution of the phenomena of oneself as a human subject (§3.3), changing how one appears to oneself.

## 4 A Phenomenology of Professionalization

Let’s begin with some basic clarifications of the backdrop to an experience of professional failure: a brief phenomenology of professionalization itself.

<sup>8</sup>Compare *Experience and Judgment* §§21b, 71, 76, and esp. 78 on “act-cleavage.”

<sup>9</sup>Compare *Experience and Judgment* §71.

<sup>10</sup>This, I think, is why optical puzzles like my “radical” illustration above continue to hold an allure: although we’ve come to a judgment about what’s really going on, we still find the conflicting experiences to be themselves somewhat compelling in purporting to present us with the world.

## 4.1 Theses

What is it to be committed to a plan for achieving professional success? In large part, it consists in having long-lasting convictions that have been sedimented as personal character traits through repeated re-endorsement. The theses in question are numerous and interlocking.

There are theses concerning the value of the nascent interest-motives that one hopes to pursue and fulfill in the profession. There are two broad classes of theses to distinguish here. On the one hand, there are (a) affective theses that present the fulfillment of interest-motives as pleasurable. Some of these theses are expectations: one anticipates that fulfilling one's interests will be pleasant. Yet there have also been past fulfillments of interest-motives: cases where the affective thesis concerned an experience that was fully present, and which was presented as pleasurable. All these (a)-theses purport to present the fulfillment of one's interest-motives as having an affective validity.

On the other hand, there are also (b) more conceptual-evaluative theses that present the fulfillment of our interests to as "rewarding" or "worthwhile." An experience as-of a good sneeze could be the target of an (a)-thesis, a naïve claim to affective validity: a good sneeze can seem pleasant. But an experience as-of a good sneeze will likely not be the target of a (b)-thesis: upon reflection, one would likely not evaluate experiences as-of sneezing as especially worthwhile.<sup>11</sup> When one affirms (b)-theses, one is assigning an *additional* value, beyond the simple pleasure (affective validity) that is constituted in (a)-theses. Repeated re-affirmation of worthwhileness provides the motivation to *cultivate* the interests by investing effort to fulfill them.

There are (c) theses concerning the pragmatic value of securing membership in the profession as a way of cultivating one's interests. These theses present the process of professionalization as having practical validity (utility), as a way of realizing the fulfillment of one's interests. When one initially develops and sustains investment in the plan to join the profession, one is re-affirming the thesis that this path will fulfill one's interests. (a)-theses provide a nascent motivation to pursue one's interests; (b)-theses provide an additional motivation; (c)-theses constitute professionalization as a valid method of fulfilling all these motivations.

There are (d) theses concerning the ontological or existential value of *being* a subject who sustains commitment to the plan, and of eventually *becoming* a subject who has completed the plan and gained membership in the profession. These theses present this mode of being (being-professional) as a valuable way to be. This goes beyond the mere practical utility of professionalization as a means to an end: (d)-theses constitute professionalization as an end in itself.

There are a variety of theses concerning one's social-professional standing in relation to Others. I won't go into great detail concerning how peers and professionals are constituted as a unique class of consociates in the social world; suffice it to say that they are.<sup>12</sup> Broadly speaking, there are three classes of theses concerning Others to distinguish here: (e) theses that present oneself as already "belonging" alongside Others – i.e., that present Others

<sup>11</sup>I am indebted here to [one of David Mitchell's penetrating phenomenological analyses](#).

<sup>12</sup>See Schutz' *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (or its very shoddy translation *The Phenomenology of the Social World*) for a general phenomenology of sociality.

as peers;<sup>13</sup> (*f*) theses that present oneself as on-the-way-to-belonging alongside Others – i.e., that present Others as occupying a position one has not yet attained, but can attain through professionalization; and (*g*) theses that present oneself as further-along than Others – i.e., that present Others as occupying a position that one has surpassed through professionalization. The specific “Others” toward whom these theses are directed are expected to change as one proceeds in the process of professionalization – that is the essential determinant of successful professionalization.

In what follows, I’ll be constantly referring to all these different varieties of theses. Where it’s handy, I’ll throw brief reminders into the margins. (Sadly, these won’t display nicely in hardcopy.)

(a)-theses:  
fulfilling interest-motives  
is pleasurable.

(b)-theses:  
fulfilling interest-motives  
is “worthwhile.”

(c)-theses:  
professionalization has  
utility as a means of  
cultivating interests.

(d)-theses:  
being-professional has  
ontological/existential  
value.

(e)-theses:  
I belong alongside Others;  
Others are peers.

(f)-theses:  
I am on-the-way to  
belonging alongside  
Others; Others are  
where I can be.

(g)-theses:  
I am further-along  
than Others; Others  
are somewhere that  
I have surpassed.

## 4.2 Achievement, Repetition, & Integration

The core success-condition on the process of professionalization is to attain evidence that will invalidate all (*f*)-theses, such that the (*e*)-theses now concern all other members of the profession (i.e., all other professionals appear as peers; one has attained membership alongside them), and the (*g*)-theses now concern all initiates who have not attained membership (i.e., one no longer views any mere initiate as a full peer in the profession; one has surpassed them by attaining membership). Maintaining reasons to re-affirm past (*e*)-theses and (*g*)-theses, and finding and creating reasons to implement ever-new (*e*)-theses and (*g*)-theses, are the most central ways in which the experience of progress in professionalization is constituted. Long-lasting convictions in (*e*)- and (*g*)-theses, implemented by the pure ego, are the most central experiences that would constitute one’s experience as-of oneself as a human subject that has attained professional status.

The evidence that is required to invalidate (*f*)-theses and support (*e*)- and (*g*)-theses lies in “achievement.” The term has a double meaning here. On the one hand, there are those objects (in the broadest sense of the term) whose creation/acquisition is counted as an achievement: the experience as-of these objects’ existence is the experience as-of the existence of a completed achievement. On the other hand, there are experiences of achievement-as-fulfillment, where achievement is more an aspect of the experiencing itself, than of the purported object. These can come apart, and must be distinguished.

**Achievement-Objects.** Which objects are counted as achievements is characteristic of, or peculiar to, a given profession. The essential feature of an achievement-object is that its proper creation/acquisition is taken to depend upon the exercise of skills or cultivation of traits that are valued in members of the profession, by members of the profession: the skills and traits in question are considered essential for someone deserving full membership of the profession. As a result, the creation/acquisition of an achievement-object is something that members of the profession have licensed is interpretable as (and indeed, have mandated is to-be-interpreted-as) demonstrating possession of the skills and traits that members possess. In this way, achievement-objects become tightly bound up with the work-activity of the profession, and with the peculiar forms of human subjectivity that count as professional “status.” This socio-cultural (*geistig*) meaning that is attached to achievement-objects is their essential feature: they may take virtually any material form, though there are contingent aspects of “tradition” in professions that tend

<sup>13</sup>There are some subtleties here. One can be peers with someone but still think that they are more/less talented than oneself, better/worse at the work-activities of the profession, etc. Peerhood is a threshold, and many additional evaluations can be made beyond it. They don’t matter here.

to privilege certain familiar achievement-objects above others.<sup>14</sup> There are widespread practices, in virtually all professions, of meticulously documenting the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects (e.g., on a C.V. or *Résumé*) as a way of indicating one's professional status to Others. However, many achievement-objects are created/acquired "off the record," so to speak, or may not be regarded as suitable for inclusion in a standardized public record like a C.V. For example, one's spoken contributions during professional meetings – even quasi-casual conversation – can often count as achievement-objects. A great deal of professional "networking" consists in creating/acquiring highly idiosyncratic and localized achievement-objects ("scoring brownie points") in full view of members of the profession. It is not uncommon for more specialized achievement-objects to be recognized only within the local context of a small enclave of the profession (e.g., sub-fields or departments).

**Achievement-as-fulfillment.** The experience of achievement-as-fulfillment is a more subject-relative matter; it consists in the experience of an active fulfillment of one's own prior goals, despite some variety of challenge. Phenomenologically, what occurs is roughly that one has an earlier experience whose intentionality is such that it contains a thesis concerning a future experience. In this thesis, the future experience is expected in something less than any mode of certainty (its occurrence may even be decidedly doubtful or improbable), and the future experience is constituted as valuable in some way. Achievement-as-fulfillment consists in attaining the aimed-at experience, recognizing that it is the experience one had aimed-at, recognizing that it has its expected value (and perhaps a surplus), and recognizing that it was through one's own efforts that the experience is now occurring (in the mode of certainty), despite earlier appearing as less than certain. Where any of these features is lacking, one will not attain the experience of achievement-as-fulfillment: one's ambitions might be disappointed if expectations are unfulfilled, or they might be "fulfilled" but in the manner of a stroke of luck, etc.

What professionalization prescribes and demands is to coordinate these two senses of achievement, bringing them into alignment. One is encouraged to value the achievement-objects of the profession, investing them with the same significance that members of the profession do. If one endorses this valuation, it will bring with it motivations, enabling one to set goals which aim-at the experience of creating/acquiring those achievement-objects. When these goals are fulfilled and the achievement-objects are created/acquired, the experience of achievement-as-fulfillment will then come along as well.

In the ideal situation (in terms of motivation), one already has nascent interest-motives and (a)-theses that are directed at the work-activities that are required to produce or acquire achievement-objects, and which present the work-activities as pleasurable. And ideally, one also already has endorsed (b)-theses, evaluating the pursuit of these interest-motives as "worthwhile." In that case, one already has one's own motives for pursuing the work-activities that are required for creating/acquiring achievement-objects. When one learns that the profession values the same work-activities (when they lead to creation/acquisition of achievement-objects), one is poised to endorse (c)-theses, as described in §4.1 above: one can judge that pursuing the profession's agenda in creating/acquiring achievement-objects has pragmatic value as a way of cultivating one's interests.

As one pursues professionalization there is a characteristic alteration regarding the

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(d)-theses:  
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Others are peers.

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belonging alongside  
Others; Others are  
where I can be.

(g)-theses:  
I am further-along  
than Others; Others  
are somewhere that  
I have surpassed.

<sup>14</sup>In contemporary philosophy, for example, a co-authored publication is often regarded as a less valuable achievement-object than a solo-authored publication. Likewise, publication in "big-name" journals is often counted as more of an achievement than publication in newer, open-access journals.

relative weight one places upon (*b*)-theses (which present the fulfillment of nascent interests as “worthwhile”) and (*d*)-theses (which present *being* and *becoming* a professional as having special ontological or existential value.) At the outset, as an initiate, one is necessarily not well-positioned to fully understand the values of the profession, nor what is involved in being a professional. One begins the process of professionalization placing more weight on (*b*)-theses and (*c*)-theses, pursuing professionalization as a pragmatic route to cultivating one’s own interests. Over time, the cultivation of those interests brings with it the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects and experiences of achievement-as-fulfillment. The more one experiences achievement-as-fulfillment in creating/acquiring achievement-objects, the more evidence one has for the thesis that one is becoming a subject who values what a professional values. Every instance of achievement-as-fulfillment in the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects lends evidence to this thesis. As this conviction gradually extends in its duration – and especially in light of the *work* that is presupposed in sustaining this conviction – one becomes more and more invested, ontologically and existentially, in sustaining it. At some point, one is poised to actively endorse (*d*)-theses, and to begin to value being-a-professional for its own sake, regardless of whether the work-activities of the profession fulfill one’s nascent interest-motives.<sup>15</sup>

There are several ways in which such commitment to (*d*)-theses can arise independently of one’s nascent interest-motives. One possibility is simply that one discovers that one genuinely does find the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects to be pleasant: new (*a*)-like theses are endorsed which constitute new affective validities (beyond the nascent interest-motives with which one began); new (*b*)-like theses are endorsed which constitute the work-activity of the profession as “worthwhile;” one genuinely finds it rewarding to *be* professional, so one endorses a (*d*)-thesis to that effect.

This may be so for some aspects of being-professional, but it is rare for (*d*)-theses to be quite to neatly supported. The larger share of commitments to (*d*)-theses arise because motivations from other sources fall short. As one continues to subject oneself to the standards of the profession, pursuing the work-activities that it values and performing them in the way it sanctions, one will inevitably be required to do things that lie outside one’s own nascent interest-motives, or to do things one is interested in, but in a way that one does not find pleasurable or worthwhile. There will be cases there the two senses of “achievement” are difficult to align, if one is only aiming-at the fulfillment or cultivation of nascent interest-motives. In such cases, any (*b*)-theses one had implemented (regarding the cultivation of one’s interests as “worthwhile”) will fail to provide motivation to proceed in the way the profession requires: the demands of the profession will eventually fail to exhibit practical validity as a way of directly cultivating one’s interests (i.e., (*c*)-theses will be unavailable).

In some cases, one can shore up motivation by relying on (*d*)-theses that simply *complement* or supplement one’s (*b*)-theses regarding what is worthwhile. For example, completing a task T is seen as worthwhile, and while the peculiarities of how a professional is expected to complete T are not themselves regarded as worthwhile (in that they do not

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belonging alongside  
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where I can be.

(g)-theses:  
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than Others; Others  
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I have surpassed.

<sup>15</sup>It sometimes happens that one is not especially aware of this alteration as it occurs. One can tell oneself that one is continuing to pursue the work-activities of the profession because one finds them pleasurable, or because it is pragmatically useful as way of cultivating interests. Once one’s professional status is called into question, however, and one faces the possibility that one is not proceeding towards becoming a professional, it may become clear that one had in fact endorsed (*d*)-theses, and had put great weight on being-professional.



themselves directly cultivate one's interests), one can simply commit to doing T in this way because that is what a professional does. A simple academic example might be formatting a paper to meet a journal's arbitrary guidelines. This isn't fun, but might be relatively painless, so, one does it.

However, if the disparity is greater, and if (b)- and (d)-theses are in outright conflict, then one confronts a demand of self-alienation and re-invention, which is in fact essential to the process of professionalization. Two possible aspects of personal character are in tension: on the one hand, one considers oneself to be a subject who has an interest in T and finds cultivating this interest worthwhile; on the other hand, the demands of professionalization are to do T\* instead, setting T aside. Here the only motivation for doing T\* comes from (d)-theses: one must resolve oneself to do T\* because that is what one does if one is professional. An academic example might be altering the content of a paper significantly in response to reviewer feedback, moving the topics under discussion far away from the topics that lay closest to one's own interests.

The more frequently one goes along with this kind of alteration and standardization of work-activity – the more one permits oneself to be alienated from one's own nascent interests and their cultivation – the more evidence one gains for the (d)-thesis that one values being-professional for *its* own sake, in distinction to any value one places on cultivating one's own interests for *their* own sake. Self-alienation, in the form of “setting-aside” (a)- and (b)-theses, opens the door to self-creation, in the form of endorsing (d)-theses and regarding oneself as someone who values being-professional. Endorsing these (d)-theses enables one to alter one's motives and goals, bringing achievement-as-fulfillment back into alignment with the profession's conception of achievement. It is very likely that one will be able to maintain commitment to *some* (b)-theses and *some* (a)-theses as one proceeds through professionalization. But such re-invention and re-alignment will inevitably become a motivational necessity at some point if one wishes to continue along the path of professionalization.

When this alignment is in place, one experiences achievement-as-fulfillment in the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects. In terms of motivation, one is now set to pursue the path to professionalization. But this alignment is not sufficient on its own to enable one to attain evidence that one is making progress. The evidential or *doxic* significance of achievement is bound up with social validities, in two principal ways.

On the one hand, when one succeeds in the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects that the profession values, this must simultaneously be taken to provide evidence regarding one's own “professional” skills, and thereby provides evidence that can support (e)-theses (which present oneself as a peer who belongs alongside members of the profession), (f)-theses (which present oneself as on-the-way to belonging alongside members), and (g)-theses (which present oneself as further-along than other initiates). In this way, the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects licenses theses that constitute new social validities: they allow one to re-position oneself in relation to Others along the path toward membership.

On the other hand, since what is central here is the socio-cultural (*geistig*) value of the achievements, social validities are *presupposed* in the implementation of theses regarding any achievement-object's value. It is the profession, as a social organism, that determines the value of achievements. To attain the alignment between the senses of achievement, one's own assessment of the value of one's achievement-objects must track the assessments of members. In some social contexts, systems of achievements are communally constituted to proceed in relatively clear, linear gradations (e.g., colored “belts” in some martial arts; awarding honorary titles or degrees; seeds and rankings, etc.). These make assessments of

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the significance of achievements relatively clear, and make comparisons to Others relatively straightforward, supporting clear (e)-, (f)-, and (g)-theses. Other systems of achievements are a bit less linear: e.g., “publications” and “presentations” are clear achievements in many academic professions, but it is often difficult to determine the comparative value of different varieties of each. It is often the case that even after the creation/acquisition of an achievement-object, one is not entirely certain of its value. Here interactions with Others may be required to make some determination of how well one is making progress. Evidentially (and according to the profession) the most effective strategy is to rely on (f)-theses, locating an “expert” that one takes to be further-along in professionalization, soliciting their appraisal of the achievement-object.<sup>16</sup> The whole agenda of valuing and pursuing communally-approved achievement-objects demands commitment to the social validities that constitute the social world of the profession.

In sum, achievement-objects serve as an intentional nexus in experiences of professionalization. Finding value in the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects is the motivational focal point that can drive one along the path of professionalization, through self-alienation and re-creation. Their creation/acquisition is *also* the evidential focal point for unifying all the theses concerning “progress” in professionalization: the repeated creation/acquisition of achievement-objects provides the required evidence to re-affirm all these theses. Repeated re-affirmations form an interlocking web of theses, consolidating evidence in their favor, and further reinforcing motivation.

All these re-affirmations are to be understood, phenomenologically, as acts of the pure ego which result in the “sedimentation” of purported personal traits, as described in §3.3 above. These sedimentations are the appearances of a personal ego – they constitute the phenomena as-of a human being who is working through and committed to the process of professionalization, and who is becoming a professional. Repetition of these re-affirmations supports an integration and solidification of one’s identity as someone who is becoming a professional. In the Natural Attitude, we endorse the thesis that this is who we are. This is how one comes to see oneself as someone who is committed to the “plan” of professionalization, and who is on-the-way-to-being, or becoming, a member of the profession.

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### 4.3 Modalities

These different theses occur in different modalities and arise in different ways.

(a)-theses concerning the affective validity of one’s interests occur (if at all) in something akin to the naïve mode of certainty that is characteristic of perception. Most importantly, these theses arise without the pure ego’s involvement. Why do you think that thing is green? I can see it is. Why do you find the fulfillment of your interests pleasant? I simply feel that I do. The pure ego need not be involved in constituting these interests, nor the affective theses about them: they simply arise in transcendental subjectivity.

Still, the pure ego can make an evaluative judgment about these interests. The ego can make a decision about whether they are to be valued beyond their native pleasantness,

<sup>16</sup>Strategies of peer-review are intended to frontload this appraisal, weeding out unsatisfactory work and preventing it from leading to the creation/acquisition of a public achievement-object. There is, of course, much room for modalization: if the “experts” do not value one’s work, perhaps it is their expertise, and not the quality of the work, that will be called into question.

and so cultivated. These judgments contain a new (*b*)-thesis, which presents the fulfillment of one's interests as "rewarding" or "worthwhile." These theses are implemented by active decision-making, as described in §3.5. Actively-implemented theses are always – at their strongest – in the mode of "impure" certainty. Implementing these theses requires "striking-down" or "setting-aside" validities, at least in the sense of setting aside or de-valuing other interests, so as to prioritize the cultivation of these. Precisely because the certainty is impure and there are standing validities that can call it into question, the implementation of (*b*)-theses is tenuous, and is always a potential target of future modalization.

A similar mode characterizes: (*c*)-theses concerning the pragmatic value of pursuing professionalization; (*d*)-theses concerning the existential value of being a member; and (*e*)-, (*f*)-, and (*g*)-theses concerning one's professional-social standing. Becoming a member in the profession is not the *only* way to pursue nascent interests, it is simply one way in which might try to do so. Someone who chooses this particular path has made an active decision to do so. This requires "striking-down" or "setting-aside" validities," at least in the sense of setting aside or de-valuing: (*i*) other seemingly-valid paths one could take, (*ii*) other modes of being, and (*iii*) other ways of relating to Others. All this "setting-aside" is required to implement theses that assign heightened importance to the strategy of professionalization, to the validities that it constitutes, and to the validities it presupposes. While one is in-process and pursuing professionalization, the strongest modality that these theses could attain is a kind of "impure certainty" that remains open to the possibility of active doubt.

When one finds oneself succeeding in the plan of pursuing professionalization, what one finds is an increasing number of achievements. One takes these to license the ever-stronger implementation of all these theses regarding one's professionalization, in something approaching the mode of impure certainty. Anyone who has gone through professionalization will tell you that even impure certainty is typically not reached. Typically, the theses regarding one's status as on-the-way to becoming professional are implemented in a mode less than certainty: at most (if one is honest with oneself, and on a good day) the available evidence can allow these theses to be implemented in a mode of high probability. The ontological validity of oneself as becoming-professional, for example, is less than certain: one is *probably*-on-the-way-to-becoming-professional.

Moreover, the theses typically waver in shifting modalizations, from high probability to low probability or even (on a bad day) outright doubt. This is especially so if the relative socio-cultural (*geistig*) value of different achievement-objects is indeterminate in a given profession, and allows only very tenuous assessments of how well one is faring.

Understanding the impact and evolution of such modalizations is the key to a phenomenology of professional failure.

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## 5 A Phenomenology of Failure

I've provided a brief phenomenology of professionalization. What this amounts to is a phenomenological analysis of conditions 1-3 that I initially offered (pages 2-3 above) to delineate the experiences of professional failure that I would seek to analyze. I've analyzed the experiential context and background against which an experience of professional failure occurs. Now it's time for the main event. I'll first (§5.1) examine the core intentional structure of a single experience of professional failure. I'll then (§5.2) examine how repeated professional failure plays out over the long-term, and how the experience of

abjection arises, over and over again (§5.3). Finally, (§5.4) I'll examine how one might escape the dynamics of failure.

## 5.1 Perturbation

**Condition #4** on an experience of professional failure is that one makes some attempt to proceed along the path of professionalization, and one sees oneself as failing in the attempt.

Phenomenologically, what occurs here is that one fails to attain an experience of achievement-as-fulfillment (§4.2, page 13 above). A future experience had been expected in something less than any mode of certainty: the natural and effortless occurrence of this future experience was constituted, in expectation, as improbable. Yet, this future experience had been constituted as valuable in some way. Because it was valuable, one was motivated to pursue it, and one took steps to do so. The key to a failure by one's own lights is that one has not attained this aimed-at experience, *despite one's best efforts*. One took steps – sanctioned, one thought, by the profession – to bring about this aimed-at experience, doing all one could to make its occurrence as probable as one could. Yet one has not fulfilled one's prior goals, and thus one sees oneself as failing, by one's own lights, to overcome this challenge.

**Condition #5** is that the failure is not *only* seen as an isolated failure, but is also seen as preventing further progress along the path.

Phenomenologically, three things are central here. First: one understood the aimed-at experience as an experience of the creation/acquisition of an achievement-object, and one anticipated that its creation/acquisition would bring with it evidence of one's own professional status. Now how does this evidential relation arise? The successful creation/acquisition of an achievement-object is seen, by the profession, as requiring certain skills and traits. In the socio-cultural (*geistig*) constitution of achievement-objects, there is built into these objects an etiological dependency. Part of what it *is* to be an achievement-object is to be an object which, it is held, cannot be brought into existence except through the exercise of certain skills and traits – the very skills and traits which are valued in the work-activities of the profession. If one understands the socio-cultural value placed upon achievement-objects, then one can form the expectation that should one succeed in creating/acquiring it, one will have secured evidence of one's own skills and traits.

Second: the two senses of achievement *had* previously been brought into alignment: one had been striving for achievement-as-fulfillment in the creation/acquisition of this achievement-object. *Thus arises* the afore-mentioned lack of an experience of achievement-as-fulfillment, whereby condition #4 is fulfilled.

Third: one had seen the creation/acquisition of this achievement-object as the “next step” along the path of professionalization, which would enable future steps. In other words: the skills and traits whose possession and apt exercise are constituted as necessary for the creation/acquisition of the achievement-object are also the very skills and traits that are seen as required to continue progressing along the path of professionalization. Because one fails to create/acquire the achievement-object, one fails to gain evidence that one possesses these skills and traits. As a result, one does not see how it could be possible to proceed further along the path.

This kind of experience can arise at essentially any moment, but in many professions there are certain relatively standardized achievement-objects whose creation/acquisition is used to “test” initiates' skill-levels. As a clear academic example: during graduate studies one can be quite literally expelled from the pre-profession, booted off the path, if one

fails to demonstrate required skills and traits through completing qualifying exams, or the defense of a *prospectus*.

**Condition #6** is that since previous steps in the plan were supposedly preparation for this attempt, the failure calls into question whether and how well one has succeeded in previous steps.

As already noted, achievement-objects are constituted in experience as etiologically dependent upon the possession and exercise of “professional” skills and traits. When one makes one’s best effort to create/acquire an achievement-object, one must make a multitude of judgments, implementing a number of theses. Two broad categories of theses are important here. First, there are theses which constitute oneself as possessing previously-acquired skills and traits. These theses are motivated by previous achievement-as-fulfillment along the path to professionalization. Second, there are practical theses regarding how to put these skills and traits to work in an attempt to create/acquire the aimed-at achievement-object. If one fails in the attempt, one of these two kinds of judgments must be modalized. One can retrospectively call into question the thesis that one truly does possess the skills and traits in question – if one had them, shouldn’t one have been successful in the attempt? Alternatively, one can call into question one’s plans – perhaps one has all the required skills and traits, but has not put them to work properly?

Either modalization suffices to meet condition #6. For the ability to create plans to deploy one’s other skills and traits in the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects is *itself* one of the skills that is characteristic of a professional. A professional not only has, shall we say, “first-order” capabilities to perform the work-activities of the profession, but has “second-order” capabilities to self-determine how to pursue that work successfully. And so, whether one has erred in exercising this second-order skill by coming up with a bad work-plan, or whether one lacks the first-order skills required to execute an apt plan, it comes to the same thing: one’s self-apprehension is modalized, and one is re-constituted as someone who was not prepared for success. Of necessity, some prior step in the plan of professionalization must have been a mis-step. The past experiences that seemed to provide evidence for theses concerning one’s skills and traits must now be modalized: these past experiences can be recalled just fine, but the theses they were taken to support now stand in some mode of doubt.

**Condition #7** is that since success in the plan consists of attaining an identity as a member, the failure calls into question whether one can attain that identity.

The basic prerequisites for meeting this condition are already present in any experience of failure fulfilling conditions #5 & #6. All that is required is (i) that the very skills that were called into question by the failure are seen as partly constitutive of professional identity, and (ii) that the path of professionalization is seen as the cultivation of an identity, in keeping with (d)-theses. Since one has failed in the attempt, one has not demonstrated possession of these skills and traits, *despite one’s best efforts*. Since possession of these skills and traits is seen as constitutive of professional identity, one’s failure to demonstrate them is evidence that one is failing to cultivate that identity.

**Condition #8** is that since failure in the attempt interrupts progress in the plan, it calls into question one’s current identity as someone-who-is-on-the-way-to-being, or becoming, a member, and thus calls into question relationships with Others.

What is at issue here is the modalization of (e)-, (f)-, and (g)-theses. Failure in the attempt calls into question whether one possesses certain skills and traits. Previously, one had relied on theses concerning the possession of just these skills and traits (derived from experiences of the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects) to support theses concerning one’s social standing in the profession. In the face of failure, one must now

(a)-theses:  
fulfilling interest-motives  
is pleasurable.

(b)-theses:  
fulfilling interest-motives  
is “worthwhile.”

(c)-theses:  
professionalization has  
utility as a means of  
cultivating interests.

(d)-theses:  
being-professional has  
ontological/existential  
value.

(e)-theses:  
I belong alongside Others;  
Others are peers.

(f)-theses:  
I am on-the-way to  
belonging alongside  
Others; Others are  
where I can be.

(g)-theses:  
I am further-along  
than Others; Others  
are somewhere that  
I have surpassed.

reconsider this: perhaps one is not quite so far-along as one thought; perhaps one has not surpassed certain Others as one had thought; perhaps one is further-behind Others than one thought.

This is the basic flavor of a phenomenology of professional failure. Any isolated professional failure leads to a *perturbation* – a suite of ramifying modalizations – of the theses concerning one’s progress in professionalization. In an isolated case, it remains possible that the failure can be overcome. One might receive feedback from a mentor to develop a new plan; one might pursue some remedial work-activities to shore up required skills. With another attempt, it is possible that failure might be overcome, and all these theses could be re-modalized and restored to their original strength (approaching some variety of impure certainty), putting one back on the path of professionalization. But these same modalizations have profound implications when failure is repetitive.

## 5.2 Repetition & Disintegration

A single failure can produce a perturbation of the web of theses that constitute one’s experience of professionalization. With repeated failure, there is more and more evidence *against* these theses. It becomes more and more difficult to restore any of the theses in this web to anything approaching a mode of certainty. Fundamentally, achievement-objects are no longer able to function as an intentional nexus in the experience of professionalization (p.16 above). I’ll highlight four important dimensions of this breakdown of validities.

**Concerning past achievements:** When success in professionalization is proceeding apace, one finds more and more experiences of achievement-as-fulfillment in the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects, which provide greater and greater evidence of one’s success in professionalization (cf. §4.2 above). A teleological directedness or *momentum* is experienced as running through all these past experiences of achievement, and pointing towards new possibilities. Every completed achievement brings with it a horizon of new challenges to be overcome in greater achievements. Every new attempt stands on the pre-given foundation of the skills and traits acquired and honed in past achievements, cultivating them further. Each achievement is experienced not only as its *own* achievement with its *own* value, but each of them is also bound up with the others in an intricate system of solidified values marching towards “better-yet.” Husserl often talks of knowledge, of familiarity, and of practical mastery in terms of the “I can do it again” character of past experiences. The teleological directedness I am emphasizing here is an intricate set of relationships backwards and forwards between experiences in subjective time that has several characters: “I could not have done this, had I not done that” and “I can (probably) do this, because I have already done that” and “I could do that better-still-again, now that I have done this,” etc.

These “I-Can...” characters are *precisely* the ways of thinking about one’s achievements that the profession licenses and mandates in the socio-cultural (*geistig*) value that it assigns to the creation/acquisition of achievement-objects. The creation/acquisition of an achievement-object has its own “native” value, whatever it might be in each case: they were, after all, won through some effort, and their public display and circulation may have some value independent of the profession. The profession, in assigning special significance to these achievement-objects, assigns *another* value to them: they are evidence of “professional” skills and traits, which are always understood as to-be-cultivated within the purview of the profession’s training apparatus. The cultivation of these skills and traits on the march through professionalization is precisely the cultivation of “I-Can...” characters of experience, as one proceeds towards mastery of the skills and traits that are

valued in the work-activities of the profession.

These “I-Can...” characters depend upon understanding the *shared* value that past achievements have as a totality: a propulsive motivating force that is constituted in the teleological directedness that runs through them and points beyond them to ever-new challenges.

With repeated failure, this teleological directedness breaks down. Past achievements can no longer be taken as indications of one’s ability to succeed anew: if they *were* valid indications, then one would cease failing. The “I-Can...” characters of one’s experiences must be modalized: somehow one is not prepared to do this thing one is attempting to do. With every failed attempt, the “I-Can...” characters slide further and further away from any impure certainty, becoming decidedly doubtful. In an effort to correct this, one makes ever-new attempts, trying more and more strategies to attain success, reaching further and further back to find some solid core of past success that one can depend on in the new attempt. As failure occurs yet again, one becomes more and more bewildered about where the mis-step occurred that has led to one’s inability to succeed. At the extreme, the entire teleological directedness running through past achievements breaks down. The only remaining value of past achievements is the “native” value they have on their own, which is *dispersed* among them. They are no longer experienced as bearing any evident teleological relations between them.

**Concerning future possibilities:** As this momentum dissolves through repeated failure, the “I-Can...” characters of future anticipations likewise dissolve. No next step on the path of professionalization seems readily possible: I cannot bring it about, despite my best, repeated efforts. The future one had anticipated slides away as one becomes more and more certain that it is completely uncertain. At the extreme, when the momentum of past achievements has broken down completely, pursuing the work-activities of the profession offers *no* expectations of future success. There is no longer any future in it.

**Concerning social situation:** In line with (e)-, (f)-, (g)-theses, one *had* seen oneself as a member of a group of peers (fellow-initiates), working towards full membership in the profession alongside existing members. One had a plan for how to achieve success, but that plan has failed, as repeated failed attempts have called the whole plan into question in the breakdown of the teleological directedness of past achievements.

All (e)-, (f)-, (g)-theses now stand modalized. One no longer knows with any degree of certainty where one stands in relation to Others. Ultimately, one no longer has any understanding of the socio-cultural (*geistig*) value that the profession assigns to achievement-objects. One *had* created/acquired some of these objects; one *thought* this was an indicator of one’s skills and traits; one *expected* that this could lead to future success. All this has been put into doubt.

One no longer knows what it was one did that led to something that Others had deemed a relevant “achievement,” a partial success, in past cases.

One no longer knows how to evaluate the achievements of Others: do theirs contain some hidden feature that makes them incomparable to one’s own? Were one’s own achievements sham copies?

One no longer knows who is to be regarded as an “expert” in the profession. Hadn’t experts vouched for the quality of one’s own past achievements, vindicating them as indicating the possession of “professional” skills and traits? Hadn’t they encouraged the cultivation of “I-Can...” characters of experience, driving one forward into new challenges? And then again: aren’t experts (perhaps the same ones, perhaps others) now issuing an opposite judgment, as one’s repeated attempts are met with failure? Which of the alleged “experts” should be taken as having the professional mastery to issue the

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fulfilling interest-motives  
is pleasurable.

(b)-theses:  
fulfilling interest-motives  
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(c)-theses:  
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utility as a means of  
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(g)-theses:  
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than Others; Others  
are somewhere that  
I have surpassed.

correct judgment about the true value of one's achievements? And the more worrisome possibility: *do any of them really know what they're talking about?*

**Concerning self:** Any in-progress professional identity one had been cultivating in sedimentations cannot be sustained in the face of these breakdowns. The teleological unity of past achievements in subjective time has been dissolved; any seemingly stable personal character traits that were built upon those past achievements have dissolved. The phenomena of oneself as a professional human subject have disintegrated. One no longer really knows who one is. One had been cultivating a professional identity in-line with some (*d*)-thesis, which constituted that mode of being (being-professional) as valuable. One had in fact "struck-down" or "set-aside" *other* existential and ontological validities to prioritize this one. All of this is now withheld, as repeated failure calls into question the possibility of attaining this mode of being. One's own being is modalized. One sees oneself as not-really-after-all-knowing-who-one-is, having-no-clear-path.

This is where experiences of professional failure can be especially disconcerting. One might hope to find some solace, preserving some core of personal character, by reflecting on how one's achievements have fulfilled (*a*)-theses and (*b*)-theses. Not even professional failure could nullify the affective and evaluative validities these theses constitute. But if one has proceeded very far along the path of professionalization, one has likely already been alienated from many of the nascent interest-motives that led one into professionalization. One "set-aside" those motives in favor of others long ago, when one endorsed a (*d*)-thesis. And so in retrospect, it was precisely this self-alienation that led one to one's current, somewhat tragic position, in which one has tried to value being-professional for its own sake, but is failing to do what is required to be-professional. The result is a novel variety of self-alienation which does not bring with it any straightforward opportunity for self-creation. (But see §5.4 below).

### 5.3 Act-schism & the Impossibility of Encouragement

I've described an extreme in the previous section: the *total* breakdown of the web of theses that support any attempt at professionalization. But an important element in an experience of professional failure is its dynamics: it is not a *constant*, total breakdown, but rather a vibrating alternation between extremes. I call experiences at the extremity of total breakdown *abjection*. I call experiences at the other extremity *resolution*.

When one stands in abjection (or, when repeated professional failure takes on the character of abject failure), none of one's past experiences of achievement retains any motivation towards new attempts at achievement, and all theses concerning professional values, professional standing, and professional self are modalized to occur in a mode of doubt.

When one enacts resolution, one re-commits to the plan of professionalization: one resolves to try yet again. For genuine resolution to occur, one must genuinely work oneself back into the belief that "I-Can..." somehow succeed. One makes an honest effort, genuinely devising a plan that, one thinks, could lead to success despite challenges.

Phenomenologically, the most profound aspect of repeated experiences of professional failure is *not* abjection. Rather it is the alternation between abjection and resolution, in a prolonged and multifaceted act-schism (§3.5 above) involving many conflicting theses. As the phenomena of one's human, professional self have begun to disintegrate, the pure ego must try going along with theses on both sides. I try considering the evidence that could lead me to judge that perhaps success is forthcoming: I reconsider past experiences, revisit old achievement-objects, poring over them for some sliver of evidence that could

tip the scales decisively in favor of resolution. I may even succeed in enacting resolution: thereupon follows a fresh attempt – and another failure. But then I consider the evidence that would lead me to judge that success is not forthcoming: I reconsider the ever-growing list of failures, the seeming insurmountability of the challenge despite my best efforts. The pure ego is placed at variance with itself. It cannot decide the evidence one way or the other. And as a result, *the pure ego cannot constitute stable convictions that one could take as appearances of oneself as-of a stable human subject.*

This vibration between extremes occurs in the innermost depths of transcendental subjectivity. It is completely incomprehensible to any Other subject who is going on about their business in the Natural Attitude, and who apprehends all Others as human subjects in the social world. These Others cannot help but mis-understand the vibration as some crisis of *human* motivation. They recommend remedies for *human* problems. More cautious plans. More forgiving agendas. More careful attention. More sleep. A vacation. A distraction. “Where did you last see it?” Chicken soup.

This kind of solicitation is well-meant, and in many cases, it is tolerable or even pleasant. But when one has been spiraling in the vibration for some time, and when this kind of solicitation comes from those involved in the profession, it takes on a perverse aspect. Those involved in the profession, who are operating in the Natural Attitude, are the closest to who one wants to be, yet the furthest from understanding where one is. Well-meaning professionals and pre-professionals seek to provide *encouragement*, but do not understand that this is what is precisely impossible. They draw attention to past achievements – not understanding that their significance and teleological connectedness has been modalized already. They draw attention to future possibilities of success – not understanding that these are precisely what one cannot readily countenance after the disintegration. Or they seek to solicit “casual” professional conversation as if nothing is amiss – not understanding that this *enforces* the vibration, pushing one right back into the act-schism through a kind of gaslighting that discounts the profound modalizations that are motivated by one’s own experiences of failure. Or, more perversely still: their encouragements suggest that all this should have been *anticipated* – as if any aspect of the profession’s cult of “I-Can...” had prepared one for the abjection of “I quite clearly cannot, despite my best efforts and despite your best wishes.” Or, most perverse of all, they suggest that all this is somehow *appropriate*, that everything is going to plan – as if repeated failure *itself* should be assigned some secret socio-cultural value within the profession; as if the profession itself *intended* to sustain a pool of supplicants who are made to dwell in the vibration.

When one dwells in the vibration, one is not truly living alongside anyone in the profession for any duration. The entire social and practical world of the profession flickers and vibrates, it approaches and recedes. Others are at one moment near/admirable/friendly, and in the next moment remote/perverse/hostile, *over and over again*. The work-activities of the profession are at one moment attractive/rewarding, and in the next moment repellent/soul-crushing, *over and over again*.

## 5.4 Inversion & Reconstitution

There are six possibilities for how one might escape the vibration of prolonged act-schism – whether temporarily or more permanently. The starting point for realizing any of these possibilities is to “strike-down” or “set-aside” some validity. The six possibilities are: (1) striking-down abjection and enacting resolution, (2) attaining evidence of success, (3) attaining incontrovertible evidence of failure, (4) striking-down resolution and enacting



abjection, (5) reversion to nascent interest-motives, and (6) inverting all valuations of professionalization. I discuss each in turn.

One might actively decide to strike down the validity of abjection, enact resolution, and try yet again. In the moment when one enacts resolution, one has temporarily escaped the act-schism: this is the **first** possibility.

I suspect many will find this option admirable, though it does not require any more strength of will than does going along with abjection. And notably: the long-term outcome of enacting resolution remains unsettled. Resolution simply does not guarantee success. Resolution is a gamble. One hopes that *this time* one will get lucky, that *this time* the world will cooperate, that *this time* one will not be recycled and deposited once more at the doorstep of failure. This is possible: one might gain evidence that one has indeed succeeded. Resolution that leads to success is the **second** possibility for how to escape act-schism. If one attains evidence of success, then one will again be in a position to re-implement the theses regarding progress in professionalization in something closer to the mode of impure certainty. Doubts (i.e., the theses of abjection) will be assuaged, the appearances as-of oneself as a “professional” human subject will re-stabilize, and one will no longer be drawn into act-schism. This is a slightly longer-term escape from act-schism – the theses of resolution and success can remain in place unless and until they are challenged by new evidence of failure.

Yet the fresh attempts that resolution supports create just this possibility of future failure. And resolution that leads to failure brings with it a return to the vibration. All too often, resolution is repeatedly pursued not because of any strength of will, but simply because *old habits die hard*, and because one is a burnt-out husk that has been emptied of any existential-ontological values – valuations of who one wants to *be* – that could supplant the (*d*)-thesis that being-professional is valuable, and the attendant theses that motivate one to try once again.

Repeated attempts at resolution, leading repeatedly to additional failures, can bring about the **third** possibility for escaping act-schism: if one can attain *incontrovertible* evidence of failure, then the weight of evidence in favor of abjection will decisively outweigh the evidence in favor of resolution. Passive doubt will have been resolved, and there will no longer be any opportunity for the active doubt of act-schism. One will no longer be in a position where one needs to “strike down” any validities, since the validities in favor of resolution will have already been undermined. The entire suite of “I-Can...” characters of experience will have been replaced with “I-Cannot...” characters. While this is an ideal possibility, this third option for escaping act-schism is often difficult to realize. One difficulty is that many professions assign only indeterminate value to achievement-objects, making it difficult for one to ever become certain that one’s failure is truly insurmountable: past achievements might always be desperately reinterpreted as evidence of possible, future success. Another difficulty is that in the face of failure, professionals and pre-professionals are likely to offer “encouragement,” soliciting fresh attempts and enforcing the vibration of act-schism.

The other escape-route is to actively decide to strike down the validities of resolution, embrace abjection, and cease one’s attempts at professional success.<sup>17</sup> In the moment when one strikes down the validities of resolution, one has temporarily escaped act-schism: this is the **fourth** possibility. There are two distinct possibilities for more long-term resolutions along this path.

<sup>17</sup>As noted in the Introduction, I don’t consider this “quitting” the profession – one never was a member; one cannot “quit” in the sense of resigning.

One possibility along this path (and the **fifth** escape-route) is *reversion*: go back to where one was before pursuing professionalization. Reach back behind the self-alienation that the profession demanded, and re-ignite one's nascent interest-motives, reconstituting oneself as a person who values those interests for their own sake, independent of the profession.

Reversion has its comforts, and if it can be attained, one will have disentangled oneself from the profession. One will have re-constituted oneself as a human subject with relatively stable convictions in the "worthwhileness" of pursuing these interest-motives. This is an ideal possibility, but is often difficult to attain. Reversion must truly overcome self-alienation. One's nascent interest-motives have been reformed and re-directed by the profession: what had been "pleasant" and "worthwhile" has already been refashioned into "work," and one has invested great effort in learning how a professional goes about pursuing these interests in a constrained, "responsible" manner. To sustain reversion, all the professional alignments between achievement-objects and achievement-as-fulfillment must be disengaged. One must systematically deconstruct the web of theses that had grown up around achievement-objects, disentangling one's (non-professional) interests.

Here reversion confronts another difficulty: on its own, reversion fails to fully confront the validity of abjection and of failure. It fails to recognize that an interest in cultivating these same nascent interest-motives, plus a certain naïvete, are what led one down the path of professionalization and into a profound disappointment. If one is to disentangle interest-motives from the profession *and* avoid being drawn back into it, one must not only deconstruct the web of theses surrounding achievement-objects, but must be actively on guard against naïvely slipping back into the valuations of the profession.

The more radical option along this path is *inversion*. This is the **sixth** possibility for escaping act-schism.<sup>18</sup> In inversion, one embraces the thesis of the complete failure of professionalization, recognizing that it was one's nascent interest-motives, plus a certain naïvete, that led into this failure. After the disintegration of the teleological directedness of past achievements, these achievements were left only with their "native" values, viewed as dispersed overcomings-of-challenges with no connection between them. In inversion, one pursues a *new* totalizing valuation: *every past achievement along the path of professionalization is valued as a mis-step, and the totality is seen as a mistake*. After this same disintegration, one stood modalized, and one's own being was left doubtful and uncertain. In inversion, one endorses a new determinate thesis: one constitutes their human subjectivity as *being-a-failure*, as *having-been-in-error*, as *being-a-fool*. Any remaining "I-Can..." characters of experience are set aside, and instead one actively implements theses to declare: *I will no longer*. In the inversion, the profession is completely de-valued, as is being-professional. The entire web of theses is decisively inverted. The work-activities of the profession are decisively evaluated as having *no* practical validity as way of cultivating one's interests. Being-professional is decisively evaluated as *not* a valuable way to be.

If one can sustain inversion, then one has not only escaped the vibration of act-schism, but has cut off any route that could draw one back into it. There are several significant barriers to pursuing inversion.

First: *from within*. This is the nature of act-schism. In inversion one declares, in effect: "if those are the rules of the game, then I do not wish to play anymore." It is difficult to endorse this thesis, because there remains evidence to support the thesis that one *does* want to play the game, and some evidence that one is *good* at the game. Juxtaposed

<sup>18</sup>One can combine reversion and inversion: inversion can help support reversion. But inversion can also be pursued on its own.

against this is the conflicting evidence that one really does not understand the game, that one is not in fact good at it, and that no one seems to want you on their team.

Second: *from without*. The professionals and pre-professionals alongside whom one had been working expect certain behaviors – “professionalism.” They expect human disappointment in the face of failure, and they also expect the quiet re-assertion of continuing resolution: after all, they’ve all overcome past challenges, and they’ve seen you do the same. This means that if one simply disengages from the work-activities and social activities of the profession, one has not really made one’s position clear: this could be interpreted as taking a simple “break” to muster strength for the next attempt.<sup>19</sup> Mere disengagement is likely to solicit attempts at *encouragement* – which as discussed above, only re-enforce social validities that put one back into the vibration of act-schism. The *threat of encouragement* is precisely what must be evaded to attain stable inversion and escape act-schism. One must not only strike down the validity of the web of theses internally, but must also strike down standing social validities: one must actively and thoroughly alienate oneself from the profession, systematically disrupting Others’ apprehension of you, as a means of preventing them from pulling you back into the profession.

Only a thorough and public declaration of one’s break from the profession could really demonstrate that one has opted to pursue the radical option of inversion. It is impossible to do this in a “professional” manner, by definition. And there is the risk of misunderstanding: “I am done with this” may not fully convey the recognition of profound failure that is built into inversion. Perhaps better: “This profession is done with me.”

One has to confront the near-certainty that if one succeeds in making the break, the profession’s devotees will look upon you with some degree of pity and revulsion: they have already de-valued other modes of being besides being-professional, including whatever mode of being one might turn to cultivate. Many modes of being besides being-professional have already been evaluated as less-valuable than being-professional. This evaluation cross-cuts the “within-without” divide, and is perhaps the most significant barrier to inversion: one must resist inhabiting the professional perspective from which this evaluation is apt. The key to sustaining conviction in inversion is to externalize this valuation, rather than endorsing it as a self-evaluation. Inversion is a novel form of self-alienation: alienation from the professional self one had been trying to constitute, and rejection of all the validities that being-professional presupposes and enacts. When professionals and pre-professionals assert (and when you consider endorsing this assertion for yourself) that “it is truly a shame that you have abandoned the profession,” you must ask yourself – and perhaps ask them, too – “yes; but should *I* be ashamed?”

It is only from *within* the perspective of the profession that being-a-failure is treated as shameful. For any subject living within the boundaries imposed by the valuations of the profession, being-a-failure is a boundary-condition and a lowly end-state. If one de-values the profession through inversion, one likewise de-values its judgment on this matter. In inversion, being-a-failure is understood as a starting-point for pursuing some new mode of being. By striking-down the validities of the profession, one escapes act-schism, and is now free to assign heightened values to other interests, other modes of being, that lie outside the profession’s purview. Identifying and cultivating these new values is a challenge of self-creation – but by constituting oneself as a professional failure, one is poised to overcome it on one’s own terms, and has at least a chance of avoiding in the future the problematic forms self-alienation that one had naïvely tolerated.

<sup>19</sup>The seasonality of many professional job-markets does not help here, as everyone expects a long *hiatus* between attempts.

## **6 Conclusion**

I'm done with this.